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Northeastern Forest Experiment Station



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CAMPGROUND MARKETING — THE IMPULSE CAMPER

Abstract.—Impulse or unplanned campground visits may account for one-fourth to one-half of all camping activity. The concepts of impulse travel and impulse camping appear to be potentially useful extensions of the broader concept of impulse purchasing, which has become an important influence in retail marketing. Impulse campers may also be impulse buyers; they were found to spend more per day than other campers. Impulse campers visit more campgrounds, camp more often, and have somewhat different needs in camping facilities than do those campers who carefully plan all aspects of their camping trips.

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Unplanned or impulse buying has been studied in a variety of retail settings. It is known to be an important factor in sales at gift shops, flower shops, book stores, and similar specialty shops. But it is also found in more unlikely settings like barber shops, auto supply stores, and retail lumber yards. One recent study indicated that unplanned purchasing accounts for up to 50 percent of the products purchased in food supermarkets (2).

Because incomplete planning is an important characteristic of much leisure spending behavior, impulse purchasing may be as important to the travel and camping markets as it is to retailing. The 1970 National Advertising Company (NAC) study of automobile travelers at 21 popular vacation areas in the United States showed that vacationing Americans tend to have very flexible itineraries. More than three-fourths of their respondents indicated that they visited places and did things that they had not planned to do before they left home, and 12 percent did not have a

trip plan at all upon leaving home. One out of six of these vacationers was a camper (5).

Two studies conducted in 1967 and 1969 by the Northeastern Forest Experiment Station, though not aimed primarily at examining impulse camping, provided evidence that a large number of camping decisions are not planned in advance. The first of these studies dealt with visitors to state parks in New Hampshire and the role of fees in decisions of where and how much to camp (3). The second study had, as one of its objectives, to determine how advertising influences campground visits along the coast of Maine.

The Decision Point

There are probably fewer impulse campers than there are impulse purchasers in a supermarket. In the supermarket, several types of unplanned purchases may occur: (1) *pure-impulse* purchases, which are totally unplanned and apparently frivolous; (2) *reminder-*

impulse purchases, in which the store shelves are deliberately used to remind shoppers or supplement a shopping list; (3) *suggestion-impulse*, in which the shopper sees a need for the item after being exposed to it; and (4) *planned-impulse*, in which the general decision is made in advance but the specific decision on item, brand, or size is reserved to take advantage of sales, discounts, and relative attractiveness of competing items (2).

Most impulse camping is probably of the planned-impulse type, because the camper needs to have some minimal amount of camping equipment in advance. Tourist regions, containing several campgrounds, can be likened to a supermarket in which the final decision about which campground to patronize may be reserved until the tourist can personally compare camping alternatives. However, campgrounds offering rental equipment might also encourage suggestion-impulse camping in attracting tourists who would otherwise have stayed at a motel or hotel. And reminder-impulse camping decisions may be prompted by advertising that reaches the camper at home.

Since impulse camping is really a matter of a low level of pre-planning, the obvious question is: "At what point does the decision to visit a specific campground involve so little planning that it can realistically be considered an impulse decision?" In our survey of 736 campers on the Maine coast, a surprisingly high percentage made their final decision only hours before arriving at the campground:

<i>Decision time:</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Less than 6 hours	38
6 to 24 hours	8
2 to 4 days	6
5 to 7 days	6
1 to 2 weeks	4
2 to 4 weeks	8
1 to 3 months	10
Over 3 months	20

For comparison purposes, we labelled decisions occurring within 24 hours of arrival at the campground as impulse decisions; this accounted for 46 percent of the Maine coast campers and 21 percent of 699 New Hamp-

shire state park campers. These campers differed significantly in many ways from their fellow campers who were more concerned with advance planning.

Accent on Flexibility and Variety

Flexibility and variety seem to have top priority in many people's vacation planning. Among the NAC sample of tourists, 39 percent visited commercial attractions that they did not know existed before they left home, and 38 percent visited a free attraction that they knew nothing about when they left home (5).

In our studies we found that certain characteristics of impulse campers indicate that they incorporate more flexibility and variety in their camping trips than do non-impulse campers. For instance, we found that, though impulse and non-impulse campers averaged 16 days on the Maine coast, the non-impulse campers' average stay in a given coastal region or campground was nearly twice as long as that of the impulse campers (table 1). Impulse campers were also much more likely to be camping at the campground for the first time (table 2), and much less likely to have expectations of returning. Campers interviewed along the Maine coast were also asked if they planned to return to the campground in the future. Fifty-two percent of the non-impulse campers and 26 percent of the impulse campers planned to return.

The NAC study showed that auto vacationers were reluctant to reduce trip flexibility by making advance reservations (5). The incidence of advance campground reservations among Maine coast campers varies greatly

Table 1.—*Trip length and length of stay in coastal regions and campgrounds; Maine coast campers, 1969*

Type of camper	[Mean number of days spent]		
	At campground	In region	Total trip
	<i>Days</i>	<i>Days</i>	<i>Days</i>
Impulse campers	5	6	16
Non-impulse campers	9	10	16

Table 2.—*Prior visits to the campground where interviewed*
[In percent]

Prior visits	N. H. state parks		Maine coast	
	Impulse campers	Non-impulse campers	Impulse campers	Non-impulse campers
Yes	28	58	9	43
No	72	42	91	57
	100	100	100	100

between impulse campers and other campers. Only 8 percent of the impulse campers attempted to make advance reservations, while 45 percent of the non-impulse campers either reserved or attempted to reserve a campsite.

When asked to rank the importance of several factors in choosing a campground, 32 percent of the impulse campers in New Hampshire state parks rated convenience to travel route as most important, while 12 percent ranked convenience to home as most important. Among the non-impulse campers, 20 percent rated convenience to home as most important and 6 percent rated convenience to travel route as most important.

The importance of campground convenience to the travel route, the low incidence of repeat visits and return-visit intentions, comparatively short visits in a given region or campground, and the low frequency of advance reservations, indicate that impulse campers like to visit new places and see new areas, making short stops at several campgrounds along their travel route.

Campground Management Implications

The impulse camper is incompletely prepared for a camping experience. Because he is unsure of where he may be camping, or even when he may go camping, he may have less camping equipment and supplies on hand than he needs. And, because he is willing to make camping decisions on an impulse basis, he may be an impulse purchaser of other items as well while on a camping trip. The average daily expenditure for impulse campers visiting New Hampshire state parks was

\$12.57 per family, while that for non-impulse campers was \$10.34 (4). A campground store, stocked with a variety of camping equipment and other convenience items, should be able to absorb a large portion of the additional \$2.23 per day.

A good campground advertising and signing program should be helpful in attracting impulse campers. Maine coast campers who made impulse decisions were twice as likely to use guidebooks and directories as were all other campers (34 percent versus 15 percent). Impulse campers probably scan campground directories for campgrounds that are large enough to ensure having some vacancies at the last minute—31 percent of the Maine coast's impulse campers claimed to have a preference for large campgrounds as opposed to 23 percent of the non-impulse campers. Cautions in a camping directory about the desirability of making reservations may be a good way to discourage impulse campers.

Impulse-camping decisions, particularly those made on Friday for a weekend of camping, can result in more opportunities for camping trips. The impulse campers studied at New Hampshire state parks averaged 18, 21, and 26 days of camping in 1965, 1966, and 1967; non-impulse campers in those same years averaged 17, 17, and 22 days. Campgrounds situated near large population centers should be able to generate extra income by encouraging impulse camping with an advertising program aimed at the reminder and suggestion types of impulse spending behavior.

Impulse campers are not predominantly long-distance travelers, although they become a larger proportion of the total with increasing distance from the campground:

<i>Travel time to coast</i> (days)	<i>Impulse campers</i> (percent)
½	39
½ to 1	47
1+	55

The large proportion of impulse campers within ½-day's drive of the Maine coast may mean that suggestion-impulse camping behavior is as important as planned-impulse.

Impulse campers are not necessarily beginning campers. Among impulse campers in the Maine and New Hampshire studies, only 23 percent and 26 percent respectively had been camping for 1 year or less. For non-impulse campers the figures are 16 and 28 percent.

The frequent occurrence of impulse-camping behavior raises some potentially important questions in regard to Clawson's (1) well-accepted five-part model of a recreational experience: anticipation, travel, on-site recreation, return travel, and recollection. True-impulse, reminder-impulse, and suggestion-impulse types of camping behavior all suggest that a relatively low level of importance may be attached to the anticipation phase of a camping experience. According to Clawson, "pleasurable anticipation is almost a necessity" for a complete outdoor recreation experience. The absence of anticipation may indicate the lack of a strong and lasting interest in camping. Further, a high incidence of planned-impulse camping suggests that the

campground industry has highly variable quality standards and that it is doing a less than adequate job of communicating what it has to offer campers.

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